

Trans-Am, Part II: The Last Dose of Salt Water

by Jesse Dale Riley

"Do you know a cure for me?"

"I know a cure for everything. Salt water."

"Salt water?" I said.

"In one form or another. Sweat, tears, or the Salt Sea."

— Isak Dinesen

When we last left our heroes on July 19 (Day 32), they had reached the halfway point of their journey across America with a 61.15-mile leg, longest of the race, into Norton, Kansas. Istvan Sipos of Hungary had won his 12th straight stage and 20th overall to take a lead of almost 18 hours. Dante Ciolfi was recovering from shin splints and taking second on most stages. Michiyoshi Kaiho was solidly third, only six hours ahead of Motohiko Sato in fourth but pulling away, and Kawika Spaulding, last since Day 9 and 21 hours behind Moto, had started to make a run at the two Japanese after many slow days in the first three weeks. His quest to move up in the standings became the driving force of the race's second half.

Two weeks before Kawika had been dead and buried, ready to drop out on the relatively fast stage into Green River, Utah, three hours behind Moto. Overall he was over 37 hours behind Moto, and though he started to recoup the deficit after that, he continued to lose time to Kaiho. With only 40 stages left, he was over 36 hours out of third place. Nonetheless, the big Hawaiian went for it. By the midway point Kaiho and Moto had been fourth and fifth, respectively, on almost every stage for over a week, and so they remained until the Missouri River.

The Comeback

Kawika's rehabilitation occurred at a glacial pace, and did little to break the monotony of those long days on the Great Plains. Each day was a series of rolling hills through fields of wheat, past one or two towns of 2,000 people, and a few more that were much smaller than that. Our stopover was invariably the local high school, our evening meal pizza or burgers. One good thing: the heat that plagued us west of Denver broke up; and we had cool or average temperatures all the way to New York.

As Kawika grew stronger though, his style made for good racing. He'd start slow, smoking cigarettes and singing, then crank it up to nine minutes a mile later on, blowing by his competitors, who would then tailgate on him as long as they could. This, combined with Istvan's occasional stomach problems and Dante's recurrent injuries, changed the daily finishing order and strate-

gies of our five survivors.

On the long (55.8 mi) stage to Hiawatha, Kansas, Istvan initially ran easily in front, followed by Dante and Kaiho, well back. By 50 miles, however, Kawika was up to Dante, who didn't appreciate the challenge by a runner 63 hours behind him. Whereupon they dueled until they caught sight of Istvan just before the finish. Dante finished just 71 seconds behind Istvan, who was glad the stage wasn't any longer — he'd given back miles in the last part of the day. Kawika backed off in town, finishing five minutes behind Dante in 10:21:09. Kaiho and Moto were seven and 12 miles, respectively, behind Kawika, but this was the last day that Kawika would take two hours from Moto, as Moto began to keep a tighter rein on the Hawaiian. Kaiho was also pulled forward, since Kaiho had less than ten hours advantage on his fellow countryman. Only Dante, unassailable in second and once again injured after the duel with Kawika, could afford to give ground, and so it was no surprise that he came in last in 21 of the 27 stages after Hiawatha.

Now Kawika openly challenged even Istvan, keeping pace with him all the way to New York after losing three hours a day to him in the desert and well over an hour a day between there and Kansas. He started by winning two of the next three stages, on the way to nine stage wins and ten second-place finishes in the next 23 days. Almost simultaneously Kaiho recovered from his long-strained Achilles, however, and soon made it clear that while Kawika could win the battles, he couldn't win the war for third place. The day after Kawika's first stage win, Kaiho pulled back almost an hour, and on subsequent days the 50-year-old Japanese showed the wisdom of his years, staying close enough to Kawika to persuade him that third place was a lost cause. The only battle left was for fourth.

Convoy

I don't know how far away a horse can detect its journey's end, but for our group of thoroughbreds, the "smell of the barn" began at the Mississippi River. Never mind that three weeks and over 1,000 miles remained — when the body and mind are strong and enthusiastic, the distance is purely relative. Everyone began to run well now, making for the fastest and closest stages ever contested in our three-year history. Istvan still hoped to break Pat Farmer's 1993 record of 39 stage wins (he needed to take 15 of the last 22 stages) and didn't want to give away too many days. Dante was content to get smoothly through the remaining miles, while Kaiho, who made good time in the mornings, increasingly worked

with Moto to pull him through the early miles each day before taking a lunch break. Kawika, walking at the start but accelerating throughout the day, forced the others to either match his unorthodox strategy or be left behind.

We first noticed the new pack mentality on the stage to Pittsfield, Illinois, when only 73 minutes separated the first and last runners. This left fully 16 hours of free time until the next morning's start (not counting the runners' meeting at 7:00 p.m.), more time than the runners could spend eating and sleeping. The next day, on a longer, 53-mile stage that would normally string out the athletes and expose their latent injuries or fatigue, the spread was only 77 minutes. This was followed on succeeding stages (all but one of them over 50 miles, the longest week of the race) by spreads of 58:54, 48:44, 70:57, 72:02, and finally 39:16 on this stage out of Indianapolis, Indiana. That record may take a while to break.

Kawika was riding high now. On the first stage into Indiana he had taken the lead relatively early and left Istvan half a mile behind. Istvan reeled him in with several miles to go, however, and Kawika dropped behind to tail him into Rockville as the pace greatly increased. With three miles to go, Istvan, who had suffered from lack of competition in recent days, happily cranked it up to seven minutes a mile to test the big man, who responded in kind. They maintained this pace all the way in, Istvan offering the draw with a quarter-mile to go, and they rumbled in together at an amazing speed.

This was Kawika's fourth stage win and left him just over two hours behind Moto. Kawika had just taken 72 minutes from the young Japanese on this stage and had beaten him on 26 consecutive stages. Moto's chances of holding onto fourth looked to be just about zero as we prepared to head into Indianapolis the following day, but the novice ultrarunner, who had beaten incredible odds to make it this far, had a few more surprises in store for us, and one of them was that he never again let Kawika beat him by as much as an hour.

Moto Digs In

The next day Kawika was clearly feeling a little sluggish and crew chief Alan Firth, roving the course as always to check on everyone, spread the news among the group. Halfway through the stage Kawika was four miles behind Moto and, though he closed to about two miles back at the end, it was now apparent that Moto intended to make a race of it. He was running his fastest stages in six weeks and looked happier than we'd ever seen him.

The effect on morale of their race within a race can be judged by the next day's stage, when the last runner covered the 54.85 miles in 10:18:01. Everyone wanted to stay close and watch the fun. Istvan, who had collected hundreds of coins during the last seven weeks ("prize money," he called it) and had long coveted Milan Milanovich's

1992 record of 55 coins in a single stage, broke through with 80 coins found on the way out of Indy. Plus he carried them for the entire stage in his pack, along with 20 coins Kawika gave him. Plus he won the stage.

It was scary to see how strong they had become.

Only Moto had not won a stage yet (all the others had won at least four), so the following day into Ohio he took it out hard, figuring he'd have a better chance of holding the fast pace on a "short" (36 mi) course. Kawika spoiled the fun, however, blowing by Moto once again and taking 12 minutes from him in the last ten miles or so. The next few days told a similar story as Kawika won two more stages and brought the distance between them down to 1:14:30, climaxing with another late surge on the 59.35-miler into New Concord, Ohio, where Kawika passed Moto only three miles from the finish after Moto had led by 12 minutes as late as 48 miles. Both ran just over ten hours on the stage, and the last runner cleared the course almost six hours ahead of the cut-off.

The last stage in Ohio found Kawika once again flat, and Moto made Kawika pay with his first stage win. Istvan, who as the champion-apparent now placed the good of the race above his personal goals, graciously backed off toward the end to give Moto his

well-deserved place in the sun, and we noticed Moto put off stretching and icing his legs for almost 15 minutes after the victory, a first for him. The result was that Kawika had netted only eight minutes on Moto in the last week.

Stormy Weather

By now we were in the eastern mountains, each course hillier than the last, and Kawika's comeback took on the aspect of a frantic two-minute drill in football. The next stage (Day 55) into Pennsylvania covered 60.25 miles, which made for over 172 miles in the last three days and 51 miles a day average for the last 12. Nevertheless there was work to do and our two back markers continued to force the pace.

By McConnellsburg (Day 58), a stage that saw our first heavy rain of the race, Kawika had pulled to 1:04:44 behind Moto; the other three contestants seemed to be motivated only by a desire to get finished as quickly as possible each day so they could check on how much time was left between the two. And it must have been motivation enough, because the next day into Gettysburg, where Kawika pulled back another 20 minutes, the field as a whole averaged 10:08 per mile for the 47.05 miles, the fastest ever. Moto himself seemed stuck on 10:03 pace which he had done *each* of the last three

days.

Finally, on Day 60 into Lancaster, Kawika pulled to within ten minutes and 21 seconds with his ninth stage win.

Moto told me later he was sure it was over then. Both men looked unusually tired at the finish that day, but Moto more so. "Don't I get a handicap?" he joked, trying to hide his disappointment. He thought of a couple of turns he missed a thousand miles ago, when the time hadn't seemed to matter, when just getting to New York seemed a precious thing. He had been a different person then, they all had; they were scared of the future, scared of injuries. Now they were five proud athletes, skilled beyond their dreams in the sport they loved — and nobody wanted to be last.

A misty rain fell on another 5:00 a.m. start of the stage to Kutztown. Moto went out at 10:30 per mile and waited for the big man to pass him as the mist became a steady rain. By the time Moto neared Reading, the Hawaiian was still nowhere to be found, but Moto didn't know it. He preferred to make his own pace and wouldn't let Susan Friedly, his handler, call Kawika's splits to him. Fortunately for him the MoonBat crew arrived, screaming and cheering and telling him Kawika was still two miles behind.

That put Moto back in it mentally, and he tried once more to make his legs work



Trans-Am winner Istvan Sipos feeds mashed potatoes to the just-finished Kawika Spaulding at the end of Day 41 in Clarence, Missouri.

harder. In a now driving rainstorm he faced down the endless string of vehicles headed the other way, each semi-trailer burying him in water and turbulence. It was the hardest rain we'd ever had for Trans-Am.

After eight hours out there on narrow roads, the roar of engines still ringing in his head, and too much filthy exhaust in his lungs, Moto was done — 47 minutes ahead of Kawika.

The Last Dose of Salt Water

Even then it wasn't quite over. Kawika took his tenth stage the next day into New Jersey to pull within 27:49, and they agreed to settle it for good on the next-to-last day into South Orange, but Moto did the first mile that next morning in eight minutes and never looked back, covering the 50.15 miles in a PR 8:01:43. Kawika conceded and ran in with the other three in 9:32:55.

The five survivors had taken, in spades, the cure suggested in Isak Dinesen's quotation at the head of this article. The sweat had run off them in rivers. Most of the individual race records had stood against their charge, but as a group they were the fastest ever (5.11 miles an hour), with everyone under 600 hours. The two previous races had runners come in around 700 hours. The tears they kept mostly to themselves, though Moto wept openly at the finish in Central Park. And the Salt Sea was their objective for the final day's run into New York.

It was cool and partly cloudy in the city as we headed for home. The attitude among the group was professional and relaxed. I'm trying to clarify in my mind what exactly was different this year and it keeps coming back to how in 1992 the athletes felt they had nothing to lose. The race wasn't going to survive beyond the finish in New York, they felt, so let's celebrate while we can. This year our runners just wanted to savor the victory, knowing that soon their normal responsibilities would be calling on them.

The Five Finishers

In the old days (and 1992 really does seem like ages ago to me) the runners used to say at New York, "I'll never run again." Even Dave Warady, a big booster of Trans-Am, didn't enter so much as a ten-km for 18 months after his victory in our race, though he's now running well enough to occasionally beat me in our annual pre-Trans-Am training runs. OK, he *always* beats me. Anyway, here are some notes that seem relevant on this year's group after their successful crossing.

Istvan Sipos made it very clear during and after the event that he was "100 percent" sure he would run Trans-Am again. Of course he's a little over-qualified. His 2:32 marathon PR was set in a 60-km race, he's the only one to finish all three races of the Sri Chinmoy Ultra Trio (700, 1,000, and 1,300 miles, the last in world-record time), and he's *racewalked* 50 km in just 4:20. Istvan, son of a pig farmer, was apprenticed as a baker when his talent for running be-

came apparent. Under the old Communist system in Hungary, he was given easy work with the state railroad, but now he's an agent for a Swiss manufacturer of small kitchen appliances, selling them at in-home demonstrations with his wife Marta, originally an architect.

Dante Ciolfi had the highest finish ever among entrants without prior multi-day experience. He managed to get time off while his professional licenses (he's a mobile dentist) are being transferred from Arizona to New Mexico, his new home.

Michiyoshi Kaiho was a precision machinist for a company in Japan that went bankrupt, so he naturally had free time to run the race. We found out late in the race that his fine performance in Trans-Am had assured him of a new employment offer back in Japan.

Motohiko Sato remains the great story of the race, the epitome of youth, ambition, and courage in a race dominated by veterans. He will soon return to his native Japan after many years in the U.S. He told me during the race that he thought he'll never run another ultra, returning instead to the marathon. I have my doubts about that, but Moto is a person for whom life holds out innumerable opportunities. Other relatively inexperienced runners have failed in this race because they were too slow to learn multi-day techniques of patience and proper care for their bodies, but Moto didn't need to learn much — he taught *us* a few new tricks. Thanks, Moto, it was an honor to have you in our race.

Kawika Spaulding set a new record in New York: he still weighed probably 175 pounds at the finish! His biggest problem was homesickness. He longed to return to the canoe races, ultras, and parties in his adopted home of Hawaii. He struck a blow for the low-key approach by surviving a wildly disorganized crew and the consumption of record amounts of red meat, beer, whiskey, and of course his trademark, no-filter, Lucky Strike cigarettes. He ran about 200 miles of the course barefoot. The incredible contrast between Kawika and Moto was part of the magic in their long duel.

Some Fresh Horses

Beyond the performances of the athletes, however, a race succeeds through the enthusiasm of its volunteers, hopefully growing in number from year to year. This year we relied heavily on relays of crew people flown over from Japan at great expense by our sponsors at MoonBat. Late in the race we were honored to receive from MoonBat a new offer to sponsor next year's event as well, with both greater financial backing and more organizational support. They also offered us a long grace period to consider their proposal and indicated they would step aside if another sponsor made a better offer.

Our four-person camera crew from NHK Network in Japan also got in the spirit of things, helping out the race whenever

they could between shoots. Although they were permitted a vacation in Kansas, they stayed with us throughout. Their work airs October 16 and we hope to have translated copies available soon after. NHK is on the cable lineup in Hawaii, incidentally.

The Japanese remain fascinated by this epic race and it's clear now that Trans-Am probably would have died quietly after last year's finish if not for their involvement. A longtime mystery was solved when we finally found out how they heard about it.

It seems that a large (circulation 200,000) magazine in Japan called *Runners* saw a report on the progress of the race in *Ultrarunning*, and asked their agent in New York, Isao Furuichi (now our coordinator for the last stage, in addition to his many other interests), to run out and photograph the finish. He was the only Japanese there, so he didn't socialize much with the group, but he was awestruck by the 13 lean, tanned runners who had travelled 3,000 miles on foot. He filed a report that Tomoya Takaishi, a Sydney-to-Melbourne veteran, saw and acted on. His friend and sponsor, Toshihiko Okada, was President of MoonBat and his crew chief, Kenji Seki, was a former 2:29 marathoner and film crew coordinator who interested NHK in coming out this year. The rest is history.

The Two Founders

So in general we've dealt with the problem of burnout among the athletes and volunteers. Obviously we've had the advantage of heavy infusion of new blood each year — few of the original 1992 group remain. What about Michael Kenney and me?

Michael said at the finish party that he couldn't imagine a better life for himself than directing this race, and in fact it's hard to imagine how two guys like us could have had this much success doing anything else: Michael was a janitor when we founded this race; I was washing dishes. Although so far the rewards have been mostly intangible, being associated with such an ambitious, hard-working group has been a precious gift, one that we long to share with other people around the world. Despite what you see around you sometimes, there are still lots of true believers out there, waiting for the right calling to inspire them, as Michael and I were once waiting. When we find them, we'll be ready to show them Trans-Am's greatest lesson: that life *can* be an adventure — if you're not afraid of salt water.

1994 MoonBat Trans-America Footrace

Huntington Beach, Calif. to New York, N.Y.

June 18 – Aug. 20, 1994
2,925.7 miles in 64 stages

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| 1. Istvan Sipos,35,HUN | 517:43:02 |
| 2. Dane Ciolfi,39,NM | +45:28:02 |
| 3. Michiyoshi Kaiho,50,JAP | +69:19:00 |
| 4. Motohiko Sato,29,JAP | +78:55:20 |
| 5. Kawika Spaulding,40,HI | +81:05:22 |
- 14 starters